

Invitation to (Un)Learn

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What happens when institutions create spaces that tone down academic formality? Reflecting together on the past few months, this question seems to best capture our experience at IIAS. Picture a long table, with a bottle of wine and hummus sandwiches. Around it sits a bunch of people, reading Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* before they watch a Filipino movie, *Minsa'y Isang Gamu-gamu (Once a Moth)*. On the same table, they would read Dai Jinhua's caustic prose on the convergence between Mao-memorabilia and mass consumerism. Or translated short stories written by Indonesian-born Chinese authors, like Yuan Ni. With sparkling eyes and occasional laughter, they let ideas disrupt any rigid sense of time.

Doing away with formality is a shared desire in neoliberal academic institutions. We tend to assume that casualness would offset the gut-wrenching feeling that comes with expressing ourselves in a hierarchical space. Too often, however, we fail to achieve that promise of comfort. And worse, declared, if not imposed, casualness sometimes brings the opposite: it reproduces hierarchies, fuels our sense of awkwardness, or deepens our lack of confidence. Rather than the coveted figure of the slick public intellectual, we become the quintessential type of "affect aliens," to borrow Sara Ahmed's apt term (remember that time when you were fortunately funded to attend a major academic conference, in a five-star hotel in California, only to find yourself seeking comfort in the loneliness of a corner,

wondering how the rest could have learned to master the repertoire of "acting as if"?)

Being socialized in an environment that purports an adaptable façade, is it even possible to take casualness beyond its prescribed, codified form, especially among young scholars (read: precarious nomads who are pressured to publish alongside paying the bills and worrying about visas)? The IIAS 'Inspirational Sessions' opened a space for possibility. The instruction was simple: in each session, a fellow is asked to share any piece of work, be it literary or visual, which shaped his or her trajectory. Initially, skepticism was on board for some of us. Is this yet another stage for adjusting our academic selves in front of others feigning interest? Despite the pessimism, we soon realized that copresence among fellows can relieve us from the anxiety of

"footing" in conversations. Collectively, we reinvent the frame of discussion. Disagreement and tension arise without disrupting conviviality. We may enter the room remotely interested, but curiosity organically develops, taking precedence over our egos. Rather than a mere presentation, it is an invitation to be surprised. No need for a corner here.

Casualness of this kind expands – from discussions in lecture rooms, to walks along the canals, to sandwich-nibbling at Hortus, to Texels drinking at Café de L'Espérance. The next morning, the conversations make their way back within the walls of Rapenburg 59. We begin to excavate, on shared grounds, the unspoken truths of academic life without fear of embarrassment. Allow us a few examples: the expectations of what it would be like to be in a European institution,

coming from a non-Western background; the perils of thinking along binary categories; freely expressing our disillusionment toward the imperatives of becoming a "promotional intellectual"; confessing the desire for conditions that would enable us to just even imagine living a conventional life, instead of pretending that precarious academic mobility is a normal way to live. In these moments, the organic flow of talk collapses any sense of hierarchy and identity politics, allowing us to take pleasure in coming up with ideas among, and within ourselves. All this, without the pressure to publicize our intimacy.

Our enthusiasm might raise eyebrows. You could be asking, isn't the pleasure derived from casual discussions among peers the new false consciousness? Aren't we falling into the trap of romanticizing our accumulated exhaustion? We, as young scholars, are prone to justify the unjustifiable – how we have to bear through precarity for that elusive tenure. Cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant calls this "cruel optimism," the attachment to objects that structural dynamics have rendered unattainable but which keeps on providing a sense of belonging. Truth be told, we might not be getting closer to the next step – from the immediate task of finishing a chapter, to getting a more stable position. Yet, even as a "reprieve, not a repair," to paraphrase Berlant, our sense is that such moments of togetherness are invaluable. We even dare say that our reinvention of academic sociality has equipped us better to confront the realities of uncertainty.

Through 'Inspirational Sessions,' we realized that institutions, as the routinization of practices, have not lost all capacity to produce good habits of conviviality that require minimal attunement. So when weeks go by without these Sessions, we, the "affect aliens," actually look forward to the next.

Simply put, we are so glad, thankful, [insert any relevant social media terminology] to be part of this #academicfriendship.



Above: Still from the television show *Twin Peaks* depicting the fictional soap opera *Invitation To Love*.

Academic Work and Creative Writing

Dipika Mukherjee



Above: Poem by Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), Nonnensteeg, Leiden (Photo by Dipika Mukherjee)
Inset: Cover of the poetry collection *Dialect of Distant Harbors* by Dipika Mukherjee. (CavanKerry Press, 2022)

Back in 2007, while on a fellowship at the International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden, I used to frequent the Kern Library with its extensive collection on Indology. This library has now been moved and merged into the main University of Leiden Building. In 2007, however, it was housed at the Nonnensteeg, where the nuns once prayed in this oasis of tranquility in the middle of a botanical garden. Iron trellised staircases led to a maze of books, the laden shelves bordered by ancient Tibetan tankhas displayed on the walls.

In this magical treasure house, I chanced upon my first sari-covered book, published by the Writers Workshop in Calcutta. I was astonished by the beauty of the book; the jewel-bright sari cover bordered by a faint line of green and white embroidery stood out from the other beige and bland spines in a line. Inside the cover, a table of contents written in flowing calligraphic script. I recognized at once that although this book was exceptionally beautiful, it was also rough around the edges, the paper thinner than usual. I would later learn that these books had been hand-printed and handcrafted since 1958, when the press had been founded by a visionary P. Lal in Calcutta (now Kolkata), who would go on to publish the early works of the towering figures of Indian writing in English like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Ruskin Bond, A K Ramanujan, Adil Jussawalla, Keki Daruwalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, Meena Alexander, Agha Shahid Ali, Chitra Divakaruni, and Vikram Seth, among others.

I immediately wrote to P. Lal. He wrote back, inviting me to submit my work. He explained that the criteria for selection were high imaginative awareness and mature technique. With the arrogance of a newbie writer with a smattering of poetry and prose published in journals but no books to my name, I decided that I would not submit my work to a small publishing house in India where English was a second language, but

aim for a much larger readership. In 2003, I had been a resident at Centrum in Port Townsend, within walking distance of the Copper Canyon Press, and I had fallen in love with the Copper Canyon broadsides and the poetry of Reetika Vazirani. I decided to submit my work exclusively to North American and British publishers.

I was lucky with my first poetry chapbook, *The Palimpsest of Exile*. It was picked up by Rubicon Press in Canada in 2009 and my editor, an acclaimed poet in her own right, treated my inchoate words with a love that bordered on reverence. The Japanese flyleaf matched the flower on the cover exactly, and the finished product was exquisite.

But I kept seeing the Writers Workshop books everywhere, and delighting in their difference. As the press went into its sixth decade of existence, I finally realized the value of being a part of the literary history of India, and started the process of qualifying for my own handloom sari-bound volume of poetry, with exquisite calligraphy inside. P Lal had passed on, but his son, Ananda, published *The Third Glass of Wine* in 2015.

Leiden, in a lot of ways, laid the seeds for the publication of my books of poetry as well as my works of prose. It is an old and erudite city filled with wall poems in many languages. The poem painted on the wall outside my office ended with *There's no time. Or is there nothing but time?* This is an ancient town that looks exactly the same in the paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth century that hang in the museums; a city so impossibly beautiful, so stilled in time, that it spoils you for other places. From my office at the Nonnensteeg, one window looked down into a narrow alley so picturesque that I had to research whether it was the same alley in Vermeer's famous painting (it wasn't).

Since 2007, I have been back to the IIAS multiple times, to complete an academic manuscript as well as talk about my creative writing. It is a place of unfettered inspiration, and may it always continue to be so.